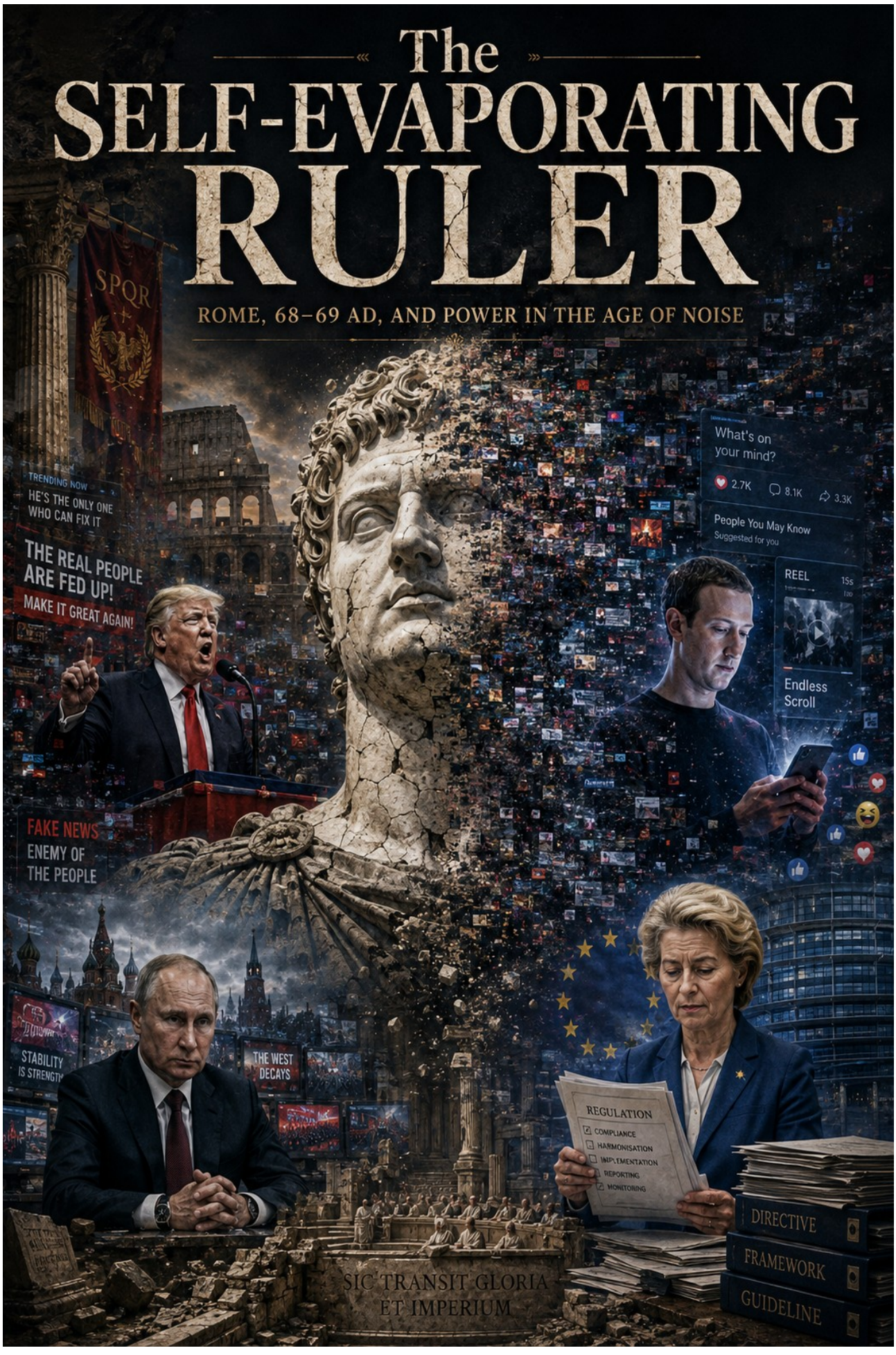
The
SELF-EVAPORATING
RULER
ROME, 68–69 AD, AND POWER IN THE AGE OF NOISE
SPQR
TRENDING NOW
HE'S THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN FIX IT
THE REAL PEOPLE ARE FED UP!
MAKE IT GREAT AGAIN!
FAKE NEWS
ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE
What's on your mind?
2.7K
8.1K
3.3K
People You May Know
Suggested for you
REEL
15s
Endless Scroll
STABILITY
THE WEST DECAYS
REGULATION
COMPLIANCE
HARMONISATION
IMPLEMENTATION
REPORTING
MONITORING
DIRECTIVE
FRAMEWORK
GUIDELINE
SIC TRANSIT GLORIA
ET IMPERIUM

In the spring of AD 68, Nero was still emperor of Rome. For almost fourteen years his face had appeared on coins, his name had headed decrees, armies had sworn loyalty to him, governors administered provinces in his name, and an enormous imperial bureaucracy stretched from Britain to Syria beneath the assumption that Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus stood at its centre. Rome had known unpopular emperors before. Caligula had been murdered in his own palace, Claudius had probably been poisoned, and succession had never been entirely peaceful. Yet the imperial system created by Augustus still possessed an extraordinary appearance of permanence. Emperors might die, but the principate endured, wrapped in dynasty, ritual, military command, senatorial cooperation and the accumulated prestige of Rome itself. Nero was not merely a man occupying an office. He appeared to be the fixed point around which an empire moved.

Then, within a few months, the fixed point disappeared.

The unraveling began far from Rome. In Gaul, the governor Gaius Julius Vindex rebelled against Nero and appealed to other provincial commanders. Galba,

the elderly governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, joined the revolt. Vindex was defeated by the Rhine legions near Vesontio, and by the conventional logic of rebellion Nero should have survived the crisis. The rebel was dead, his forces had been broken, and the emperor still possessed Rome. Yet something far more dangerous had happened. The armies had discovered that imperial succession could be discussed at all. Galba remained in rebellion, commanders hesitated, loyalties became calculations, and the question quietly changed from whether Nero was emperor to whether Nero would still be emperor tomorrow. Tacitus, looking back on these events, understood the revelation with exceptional clarity: the empire had discovered that an emperor could be made somewhere other than Rome.

Inside the capital the effect was devastating. Nero still had the palace, the titles and the legal machinery of government, but the people surrounding those things began to move away from him. The Praetorian Guard, whose presence near Rome made it indispensable to imperial survival, abandoned him under the influence of its prefect Nymphidius Sabinus. Senators began adjusting themselves to the possibility of Galba.

Servants and associates disappeared. The physical Nero had not changed, but the political Nero was becoming translucent. On 9 June AD 68, after the Senate had declared him a public enemy, the thirty-year-old emperor fled to the villa of his freedman Phaon outside Rome and killed himself. The last Julio-Claudian ruler, descendant of a political order that traced itself back to Augustus, ended not at the head of an army or surrounded by the magnificent apparatus of state, but as a frightened fugitive with a handful of attendants.

What followed was even more revealing. Nero's death did not restore stability because the problem had ceased to be Nero. The problem was that the empire had learned something about itself.

Galba entered Rome as emperor, but the aura of imperial permanence had already been punctured. He was old, austere and unwilling to distribute the enormous rewards that soldiers had been led to expect. His former supporter Otho became disappointed when Galba chose another successor. In January AD 69, the Praetorians turned again. Galba was murdered in public and Otho became emperor. Meanwhile, on the Rhine, the legions had proclaimed

their commander Vitellius emperor. His armies crossed the Alps, defeated Otho's forces at Bedriacum, and Otho committed suicide in April. Vitellius then became the third man in less than a year to occupy the supreme position. By July another military constellation had formed around Vespasian, commander of Roman forces in Judaea. Eastern and Danubian armies backed him, Vitellius's forces were eventually defeated, and in December Vitellius himself was dragged from hiding and killed. Vespasian emerged as emperor and founded the Flavian dynasty.

Four emperors had appeared in rapid succession: Galba, Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian. Three were dead by the end of the struggle. The empire itself had not disappeared. Roads still carried traffic, taxes continued to be collected, cities traded, provincial administrators worked, and Roman armies guarded enormous frontiers. What had dissolved was something less visible and perhaps more important: the assumption that imperial supremacy naturally resided in one particular human being.

This was the political discovery of 68 and 69. An emperor was not, in fact, the source of imperial power.

He was the point at which multiple forms of power temporarily converged. The Senate recognized him, soldiers obeyed him, governors administered territory in his name, elites accepted his patronage, officials circulated his orders, coins reproduced his image and subjects behaved as though the arrangement would continue. Sovereignty appeared concentrated in one body, but it was actually distributed across a network.

Nero's extraordinary transformation therefore becomes easier to understand. Nothing mystical was removed from him. An entourage stopped reproducing him.

The word *entourage* should be understood broadly. It includes not merely courtiers standing around a throne but the entire environment that continually confirms a ruler as ruler. When that environment is stable, authority appears solid. When parts of it defect, every remaining participant begins watching the others. Loyalty becomes less a matter of affection than expectation. A senator may support an emperor whom he dislikes if he believes the army will continue supporting him. A commander may remain loyal if he expects other commanders to remain loyal. But once people begin asking whether everyone else will still

be loyal next month, authority can collapse with the dynamics of a bank run. Nobody needs to hate the emperor. They merely need to fear being the last person still invested in him.

AD 69 made this knowledge contagious. Once one emperor had been replaced by a provincial coalition, the possibility could no longer be forgotten. Augustus had spent decades constructing a political architecture in which monarchy hid beneath republican forms, dynastic prestige, religious authority and military command. Nero's fall exposed some of the machinery beneath the marble. Tacitus's famous observation that emperors could be made outside Rome was therefore more than a comment about geography. It described the decentralization of sovereignty itself.

The empire survived the revelation, but it had to adapt to it. Later rulers paid obsessive attention to military loyalty, succession, dynastic presentation and the cultivation of political constituencies. The relative stability of the Antonine period did not mean that the problem had disappeared. It meant that the problem was being successfully managed. Predictable succession, military legitimacy and the careful reproduction of imperial authority mattered precisely

because everyone now knew what happened when they failed. The emperor remained supreme, but supremacy had acquired a qualification: supreme while enough of the system continued agreeing that he was.

Two thousand years later, the political anatomy is radically different. There are no Praetorian Guards deciding which emperor receives the purple, and modern states cannot be reduced to Roman courts with smartphones. Democratic legitimacy, constitutions, elections, mass bureaucracies, parties, courts, corporations, global financial systems and electronic communication produce entirely different structures of power. Yet the Roman crisis offers a useful lens because one element remains recognizable: **sovereignty is still never contained entirely inside the sovereign**.

The postmodern complication is that the entourage has become enormous, dispersed and partly invisible.

Political authority today is reproduced not only by ministers, parties, civil servants, judges, military institutions and voters, but also by television networks, online platforms, search engines, influencers, donors, polling organizations,

recommendation algorithms and millions of individuals circulating fragments of political reality. The ruler no longer stands simply before a population. The ruler enters an informational environment in which attention itself has become a contested resource.

This creates a peculiar new danger. The Roman emperor could begin evaporating when the institutions around him stopped producing his authority. The postmodern ruler may also begin evaporating by **overproducing presence**.

The attention economy rewards frequency, novelty, conflict, emotional intensity and surprise. An actor who learns to dominate it can acquire enormous visibility. But visibility has an inflation problem. What shocks today becomes ordinary tomorrow. The extraordinary communication must therefore be repeated, renewed or intensified. Eventually the political figure who originally used the medium begins adapting to the demands of the medium. The ruler believes he is occupying the noise, while gradually the noise is occupying him.

Donald Trump's political communication provides an unusually vivid contemporary example. His ability to

command attention through continuous direct communication has become part of his political architecture, and even official White House communications in 2026 routinely point audiences toward his Truth Social statements. The important point is not whether this strategy is successful; clearly it can be. The more interesting question concerns what happens when political authority becomes dependent on continual informational presence. Silence may cease to communicate dignity and begin to look like absence. Yesterday's extraordinary declaration establishes today's baseline, requiring another intervention to recover the same intensity of attention. Political communication becomes less episodic and increasingly atmospheric.

Atmosphere, however, possesses an inconvenient quality: people stop noticing it.

A ruler who speaks rarely can transform speech into an event. A ruler who communicates constantly may dominate the information environment while simultaneously reducing the symbolic value of each individual intervention. Power becomes abundant, and abundance can cheapen its representation. The danger is not necessarily electoral defeat or institutional

collapse. It is subtler: the individual can remain immensely powerful while gradually becoming inseparable from the stream of content surrounding him.

The Kremlin presents a different version of the problem. Russian power has long placed enormous importance on controlling, shaping and contesting information. Its official communication apparatus produces a continuous interpretation of events, while the broader Russian information environment has become deeply structured by state power. The strategy can be effective because uncertainty itself can weaken opposition: if every event has competing explanations, shared interpretation becomes difficult. But this contains a potential recursive danger. A system that repeatedly teaches audiences that information is strategic, manipulated and contingent may eventually weaken the special authority of its own statements. The weapon aimed outward can slowly alter the informational environment inward as well. The palace poisons the epistemic well and eventually discovers that its own kitchen draws water from it.

Meta offers an even stranger case because here the institution under pressure is not primarily a

government but one of the companies that helped construct the attention environment itself. Facebook and Instagram became extraordinarily powerful by turning attention, social interaction and recommendation into scalable infrastructures. Yet in 2026 Meta is simultaneously facing major legal challenges concerning allegations that aspects of those platforms were designed in ways harmful or addictive to young users. The European Commission has preliminarily found that the design of Facebook and Instagram breached the Digital Services Act, while in the United States Meta is contesting sweeping claims brought by state governments. Meta denies important allegations and litigation remains ongoing, but the structural irony is already visible: the mechanism that created extraordinary corporate power has generated social consequences large enough to produce an expanding legal and political counter-environment around the company.

Here self-evaporation takes a particularly elegant form. Meta does not disappear because people stop using its products. It becomes politically vulnerable partly because its products became too consequential to remain merely products. Success enlarges the

institution until society begins reorganizing around the consequences of that success, and eventually courts, regulators, governments, researchers and users begin acting back upon it. The network does not simply amplify the company. It generates the forces capable of constraining the company.

Europe provides a fourth mechanism. The European Union is neither a personalist regime nor a corporation, and its authority is deliberately distributed among institutions. Yet precisely because European legitimacy rests heavily on procedure, law, negotiation and bureaucratic competence, the contemporary attention environment creates a peculiar challenge. European institutions must operate publicly inside the same communicative space as celebrities, political provocateurs, commercial brands, conspiracy entrepreneurs and viral entertainment. At the same time, the EU is attempting to regulate the digital environment through instruments such as the Digital Services Act and broader policies addressing information manipulation and platform responsibility.

The temptation for institutions in such an environment is understandable: become faster, simpler, more visible, more personal and more emotionally legible.

Yet something can be lost in that adaptation. An institution whose authority partly derives from deliberation and procedural distance risks diminishing itself when it begins behaving like another contestant in the attention market. The bureaucratic institution becomes an account. The account produces content. The content competes with millions of other pieces of content, and the mysterious weight of government begins rubbing shoulders with breakfast videos and football arguments.

Institutions can not and should not withdraw from modern communication. Silence can produce irrelevance just as easily as overexposure can produce trivialization. The problem is more difficult: contemporary power must remain visible without allowing visibility to become its principal measure of existence.

That is where the Roman analogy becomes useful again.

Rome in 68 and 69 discovered one form of political disposability. The imperial centre had looked permanent because an enormous network continually reproduced its permanence. Once that network fragmented, Nero could pass in a few months from

ruler of much of the known Mediterranean world to a man hiding outside Rome. The year that followed made the lesson explicit. Galba, Otho and Vitellius each briefly possessed the highest title imaginable, yet the title could not protect them once the surrounding coalition reorganized itself.

Our world introduces another possibility. Authority may dissolve not only through abandonment but through saturation. The sovereign enters the network because the network has become indispensable to sovereignty. Once there, however, the sovereign becomes measurable by the network's own criteria: visibility, engagement, circulation, reaction, repetition. Institutions begin adapting themselves to remain perceptible. The result can be a slow inversion in which the instrument originally used to project authority begins defining what authority must look like.

This is why the phrase **self-evaporation** captures something that ordinary descriptions of political decline miss. Collapse suggests a building falling. Evaporation describes something that can happen while the structure remains standing.

The government continues governing. The president remains president. The corporation remains enormously profitable. The bureaucracy continues issuing regulations. The Kremlin still occupies the Kremlin. Meta still operates platforms used by billions. Europe still negotiates, legislates and administers. Yet the symbolic concentration that once made institutional presence feel heavy can gradually disperse into the surrounding informational atmosphere.

In Rome, the mechanism was visible because swords eventually appeared. In our world it may be much harder to recognize because nothing necessarily happens at the decisive moment. No Praetorian gate opens. No Senate declares the ruler an enemy. No emperor flees through the night. Instead, an institution produces another statement, another video, another post, another controversy, another clarification, another response to the response. Each intervention appears to demonstrate activity. Collectively they may communicate something different: dependence.

The danger for the future may therefore lie less in rulers becoming invisible than in their becoming

impossible to distinguish from the environment through which they rule.

That would be a strange historical reversal. For most of political history rulers feared disappearing from public consciousness. Monumental architecture, coins, ceremonies, portraits, speeches, uniforms and ritual existed partly to ensure that power remained visible. Augustus filled Rome with stone. Nero placed his image throughout the empire. Modern politics inherited the same instinct and acquired technologies capable of satisfying it beyond anything an ancient emperor could have imagined.

Yet infinite visibility may produce the opposite result from monumental visibility. A statue dominates a square partly because it does not move. A message dominating a feed exists for seconds before the thumb moves again.

The lesson of 68 and 69 was not simply that emperors could fall. Rome had always known that rulers could die. The disturbing discovery was that imperial solidity depended upon innumerable people continually behaving as though it were solid. Once that behaviour changed, the emperor seemed to

evaporate before the empire itself had even understood what was happening.

Our own political environment may be teaching us a related lesson from the opposite direction. Authority can be weakened when people cease reproducing it, but perhaps also when it tries so relentlessly to reproduce itself that reproduction becomes indistinguishable from noise.

Nero's world discovered that the ruler was not the empire.

Our world may be discovering that **visibility is not authority**.

And if the institutions of the twenty-first century fail to understand that distinction, their danger may not always be overthrow, revolution or spectacular collapse. They may remain exactly where they are, speaking continuously, appearing everywhere, commanding enormous resources and filling every available screen, while something far more elusive quietly departs.

They may still possess power.

But the world may have begun scrolling past it.